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School Board's Seven Locks Plan Rejected by County Council

By Lori Aratani
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Friday, May 12, 2006; B09

The Montgomery County Council rejected a plan yesterday to build an elementary school in Bethesda, handing School Superintendent Jerry D. Weast a rare defeat and further straining relations between the council and school board.

County Council members denied a \$3.3 million budget request that would have gone toward construction of a 640-student elementary school on Kendale Road to replace the much smaller Seven Locks Elementary School campus. Weast has seldom been challenged on his leadership of the state's largest school system.

"I support [the superintendent's] initiatives generally and support the budget," said council member Howard A. Denis (R-Potomac-Bethesda). "But you can't get everything you want every time."

Michael L. Subin (D-At Large), chairman of the council's Education Committee and a supporter of the Kendale Road plan, said simply, "This is not a happy day."

With the question settled, County Council members must find a way to address crowding issues that plague Potomac area elementary school campuses. The council put off until next week a proposal offered by Denis to build a bigger Seven Locks campus on the school's current site.

The school board, County Council and Seven Locks community have been at an impasse for several months over plans to build a school to replace Seven Locks -- with 250 students, one of the smallest elementary campuses in the county. The very public spat is unusual in a county where few school board requests have been subject to such scrutiny. Four public hearings have been held on the matter since February.

Community members have long voiced opposition to the Kendale Road site, but it wasn't until after the county's independent investigator, Thomas Dagley, issued a report in February which criticized the school system's plan that County Council members began to take a closer look at the project. Dagley questioned whether the school system had provided accurate cost estimates and charged that the school system misrepresented community support for a school on Kendale Road.

In March, the County Council and school board agreed to form a joint work group to resolve the stalemate. Although the group came up with 10 alternatives, the school system -- calling the Kendale Road plan the fastest, most cost-effective solution -- continued to push it, a position that irritated many

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on the council.

Many of those frustrations bubbled up at yesterday's meeting, as County Council members attempted to sort out the complexities of a building project that has dragged on for more than six years and has gone through several iterations.

At one point in the three-plus-hour hearing, council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) threatened to call security when school board member Stephen N. Abrams (Rockville-Potomac) kept interrupting him.

"This has been an interesting issue to watch and has created a high degree of political theater," said council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty).

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